



Notes from the Consultant's Corner

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Calling All Diplomats... How to Work with Angry Clients

You see them in your pet hospital, and you know who they are. They are the angry clients who gobble up your time and zap your energy. There are days when you'd probably rather clean up a cat abscess than deal with angry clients; yet you know you'll have to deal with them eventually.

Angry clients are difficult because they are often hard to figure out and they gobble up precious time that you don't have to deal with. Anger is a normal, natural emotion that all people feel, but what makes anger so difficult is the negative energy behind it. If you work to understand why your client is angry, you have a much better chance at diffusing it. Many clients use anger to cope with their feelings of fear, grief, guilt, frustration, and helplessness. In today's world, it is far more socially acceptable to express anger instead of deeper emotions like grief or guilt (this is especially true for men). If you can figure out what is driving the anger, you can diffuse the situation that much quicker.

Many times a client's anger can result from a simple miscommunication. It may start small and escalate into a full-blown problem. When working with angry clients it is also important for you to understand how *you* personally react to anger. Do you get angry in return, do you freeze up, or do you just want to escape? Knowing your personal hooks and triggers will help you find ways to *respond* to the anger rather than *react* to it.

Strategies in Dealing With Angry Clients

- Conduct the discussion in private. There is nothing worse than having a conflict with a client in front of everyone in your waiting room. Angry people can feed off of an audience and may act differently when they are alone with you.
- Keep your cool. Responding in like fashion to an angry tirade will only inflame the situation. In most cases, these arguments can create power struggles and you will have a very difficult time reaching a compromise. People who are very angry are usually feeling out of control. You need to model for them what control looks like by staying calm yourself. Remember...power is relaxed. Take a few deep breaths and remember that this is not about you but rather your client's frustrations.
- Let the client vent. Sometimes people just need to blow off some steam. They may not even mean to attack you personally but are so frustrated that they lose their perspective and attack you because you are the closest target. Try to not take their comments personally but be sure to let them know when you have reached your own limits before you become angry yourself. If another person's anger is abusive or completely inappropriate, your job is to protect yourself and your staff. Set specific limits on about what you will not tolerate ("I would like to hear what you have to say, but I cannot help you if you continue to yell at me.")
- Use open-ended question to understand your client's need, complaints, or concerns. In order to effectively diffuse a client's anger, you must be sure to understand exactly what the problem is. Paraphrase what they say to make sure you understand the problem from their point of view.
- Listen and validate your client's feelings as much as you honestly can. Most people who are angry feel that know one is listening to them or care about their problems. If you demonstrate that you are listening and understanding them, they are more likely to calm down.
- Communicate empathy and a willingness to find some basis for agreement and compromise. Show that you are empathetic with saying things like, "I see your point." Avoid using the word "but" as it tends to undermine everything you have said just before. Once you show clients that you are on their side and have their best interests at heart, you are more likely to succeed.
- Keep in mind that you are the one with the power. Clients are at your pet hospital because they need or want something from you. Set limits and help clients to see that anger will not help them in the long run. Once they realize that being angry will not get them what they want, they are more likely to calm down and behave more appropriately.
- Be willing to "fire" a client if necessary. There are some people who are just chronically angry. Despite your best efforts, you cannot diffuse their anger and they are always inappropriate with you or your staff. Your responsibility as a care provider never extends to being with a person who is totally inappropriate or abusive. Your job in these situations is to protect yourself and your staff.